

Price of silver is a coin-flip

By Roger Boye

This week's column answers more questions from Chicago Tribune readers.

Q—Is this the right time to unload common-date silver coins? We noticed that silver was selling for \$7.20 an ounce [in June], its highest level in months.

P. L., Chicago

A—Only Houdini would know for sure. Since early 1986, silver prices have ranged from \$10.20 to \$4.87 per troy ounce. Many economists predict that the inflation rate will increase later this year and in 1989, which could help boost precious metal prices. Silver's record value of nearly \$50 an ounce was set in early 1980.

Q—How much would we pay for coins from the Confederate States of America? We already own several \$10 and \$20 Confederate bills.

H. J., Chicago

A—Plenty! The Confederacy issued millions of paper dollars but just a handful of coins—12 one-cent pieces and four half dollars.

A Philadelphia die-sinker made the pennies in his shop but failed to deliver them to the South, fearing arrest by federal troops. An original Confederate cent retails today for at least \$15,000.

A half dollar is even more expensive; all four specimens were produced in New Orleans on authentic U.S. silver half-dollar slugs confiscated by the Confederacy.

Q—Why do so many old U.S. gold coins cost the same, even those with low mintages? For example, a guidebook says that both the 1898 and 1904 \$20 gold pieces sell for about \$525 in "very fine condition." Yet the government made just 170,470 of the 1898s and more than six million 1904s.

B. M., Arlington Heights

A—Few people can afford to collect the so-called "double Eagles" or other gold coins by date and mint mark. Specimens with small mintages aren't in demand, which keeps their prices comparatively low.